SAN FRANCISCO ART ASSOCIATION
BULLETIN

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MOSAIC—FACADE OF ART GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, *by Helen Bruton*

A Revival of Mosaic Sponsored by the Federal Art Project

By Arthur W. Sears

When the Federal Art Project was organized in November, 1935, its director, Joseph A. Danysh, and his assistants, Joseph Allen and William Gaskin, were faced with the problem of putting some one hundred certified artists to work at once, at work for which they were trained and fitted, and with the necessity of finding sponsors able and willing to provide materials for this work.

Mosaic soon suggested itself as a medium admirably adapted to meet the requirements. *First,* it permits one artist to keep a crew of eight or ten others busy. *Second,* mosaic is an essentially architectural medium, one that is admirably suited to the requirements of contemporary design. *Third,* in the matter of securing sponsors, it is much easier for the layman, unacquainted with, and perhaps unsympathetic to, current trends in art, to accept a fine mural design when it is to be executed in mosaic, where he can see the definite limitations of the medium, than when it is to be painted, in which case he is pretty apt to feel that art should "hold the mirror up to nature."

Mosaic is especially suited to San Francisco where our large Italian population has favored the accumulation of large quantities of marble and plenty of skilled artisans trained in the cutting and handling of marble. As a result several mosaic projects were soon set up and functioning. At the present time there are three large mosaics completed and in place in the Bay Area and several more either planned or in progress.

The first actually to be completed were the two by Helen Bruton and Florence Swift, on the east façade of the University of California Art Gallery. These mosaics are constructed of tile and are the largest to be attempted in this section since the Stanford Chapel. Material costs were met by Albert Bender and an anonymous friend of the University, and to keep them as low as possible the artists utilized scrap tile from a local (San Jose) factory, which could be bought in large lots for a very small price. Having selected their palette from the scrap piles, the tile, which has a very light terra cotta base, was ground down to one-half inch in thickness and then clipped to the required sizes and shapes.

These decorations are executed more or less in the Italian manner, which, however, has been admirably adapted to new artistic ends.

The mosaics were first assembled face up on the studio floor and when finally completed had to be turned over and glued to a stiff paper in irregular sections and transferred, section by section, to the freshly plastered wall.

Besides their regular crew of assistants, Walter Dickie, Leonard Meuman, Douglas Connelly, Douglas Nicholson and Clifford Pyle, the artists were assisted in the actual placing of the tile on the wall by Anthony Falcier, a mosaic technician of many years' experience.

In San Francisco the large mosaic completed at the present time was designed by Maxine Albro and is placed over the Haight and Buchanan streets entrance to the Hall of Natural Science of the San Francisco State Teachers College.

The technique used was similar to that employed in the Berkeley mosaics except that as marble was substituted for tile the tesserae were the same color on both sides, obviating the laborious process of turning the completed design over before setting it. The full size cartoon was simply reversed, laid on the floor and the marble tesserae glued directly to it, again in irregular sections. Then, when the sections were pressed into the plaster and the paper washed off it was again, so to speak, turned right side out.

Also, the marble called for different cutting methods. Instead of being clipped with steel nippers, as the tile was, it was cut to approximate size by an especially constructed "guillotine," the finer chipping being done by hand with a sort of modified geologist's hammer.

The technical supervision on this project was in the hands of Mr. Primo Caredio, a master mosaic setter who served his apprenticeship in Italy but has a record of many years' successful experience in this country.

Probably the outstanding piece of work of the mosaic program is not, strictly speaking, mosaic, but the closely allied technique of inlaid marble, called by the Romans *opus sectile.* This technique has rarely been used since Byzantine times and probablv never as a mural decoration in this country. It is completely unique in that the colored marble is to be used with a background of gold and silver leaf. It will not be a decoration on a wall, but an integral part of the wall.

Originally designed by Mrs. Marian Simpson as two fresco panels, for spaces approximately fourteen feet high by seven wide, the decorations will flank the main entrance to the lobby of the new Alameda County Court House in Oakland. Mr. Gaskin (Supervisor of the San Francisco Projects), a fine artist and a thorough scholar, suggested marble inlay. There was some trepidation on the part of artist, supervisors, advisory board and sponsors, but the idea was so plainly a "natural" it had to be tried.

At the present time the colored marbles have all been selected and are being cut and polished by

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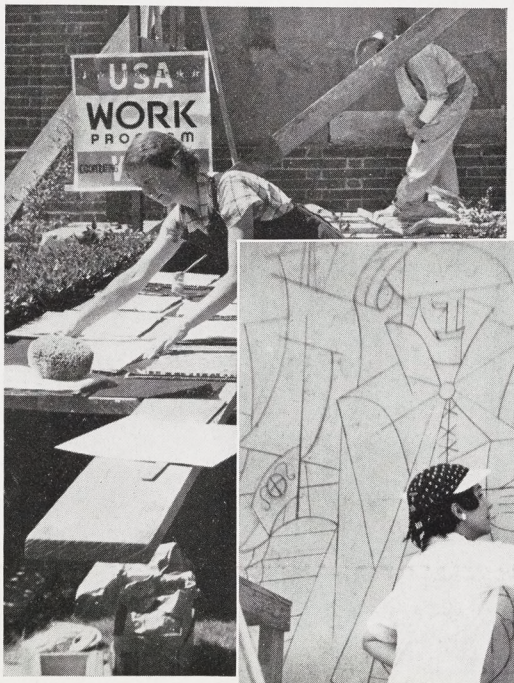
New Members, San Francisco Art Association

Lay Members— Mrs. A. H. Brawner, Mrs. L. M. H. Boisseree, Mrs. Joseph Bransten, Mr. William Haas, Mrs. Richard Heimann, Dr. Mary H. Layman, Mr. Robert Steinberger, Mrs. Paul Wood.

Associate Artists—Mrs. Cabot Brown, Mr. Joseph E. Knowles, Mrs. Helen Reynolds, Miss Cynthia Towne, Miss Leontine Wallace.

Active Artists—Mr. Ettore Cadorin, Miss Eleanor Young.

The Chairman of the Membership Committee is Mrs. Leon Liebes.

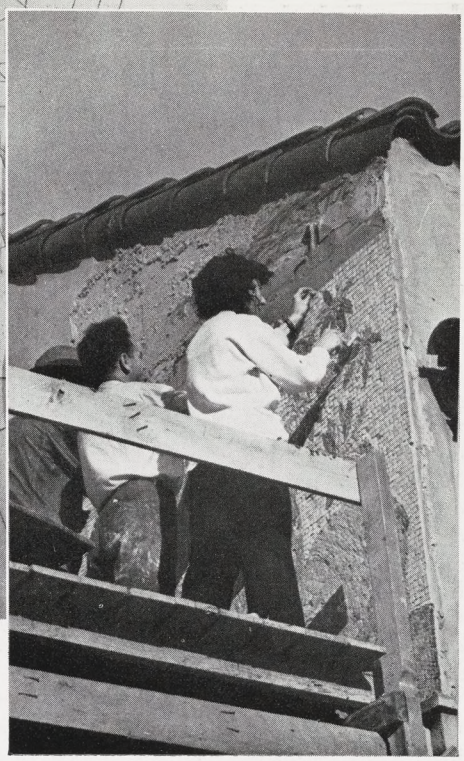


Above — Helen Bruton preparing the mosaics for transference to the plastered wall — University of California project.



Right—Marian Simpson drawing the cartoons on the wall—Alameda County Courthouse.

The accompanying photographs illustrate the federal government's entry into the field of art. As a medium of contemporary design, mosaic has been too long neglected in this country, especially in the West, where climatic conditions and architecture are so favorable to it. Its rebirth constitutes one of the most distinguished contributions of the federal art program.



Right—Maxine Albro at work on the wall placing mosaics in the plaster—State Teachers' College, San Francisco.

Mosaic as a Modern Expression

A Letter to the Bulletin from HELEN BRUTON

Twenty-Nine Palms, California.

I'd much rather tell you about Twenty-Nine Palms than to try and write anything about mosaic. Twenty-Nine Palms is like something out of a Marx Brothers' picture. There are so many mountains and canyons to explore that it is really a great trial to have to sit still and wrack my brain for something to say. And the desert wind makes me sleepy. However, I shall shut my eyes and hold my nose and try and swallow it—or rather spit it out—so that I can do my exploring with a better conscience.

It seems perfectly natural that a revival of interest in mosaic should come along with the revived interest in the other old mediums, and with a greater concern for the architectural fitness of decoration. As a medium for modern expression, particularly in outside decoration, it has endless possibilities. But in this exciting period of opportunity for artists there will be places that are right for mosaic, and others that are right for fresco, and others that are much better left undecorated, and we shall need to use both good judgment and restraint lest we overplay our parts.

One of the best things about mosaic is that the very limitations of the medium demand a simplified and formal treatment. It is a sort of combination of painting, sculpture and fancy-work. Strangely enough, it seems to be less critically judged by laymen than other art forms. I am interested to find that women are inclined to think of it as just an enlarged kind of bead-work, and generally want to start right away on one themselves; while the critical faculties of the men seem to be numbed by the thought of the tedious labor involved, and if the drawing may seem to them a bit odd they are apt to blame it on the material rather than the artist. I do not think it is as difficult as painting—as good painting—but it is more strenuous, and so far I haven't been able to accomplish anything in it without a lot of concentrated hard work. The reason for this is largely that I haven't yet done enough of it to be willing, or able, to turn over more of the work to helpers, but feel a sort of jealous personal interest in the way each stone is placed. I feel sure that the great mosaics were not done in this way, and that a good teacher or director could get much more done with less effort.

You may be interested to know that any picture, piece of ornament or plaque made up of little pieces of durable material of any kind is classified by the customs as a "mosaic", and is subject to an almost prohibitive duty on entry into this country. According to the customs law it is definitely "not a work of art", regardless of the quality or beauty of design in the thing itself. So if anyone thinks it would be advantageous to go to Italy to study, and to use Italian materials to execute a mosaic over there (even if they were pebbles from the beach), he might as well bear in mind, that if by the widest stretch of the imagination it might fit the customs' definition of mosaic, it would be subject to a tariff of at least sixty per cent if he wanted to bring it back to the United States. That this law almost forces us to make use of domestic materials, and practically prohibits the importation of modern Italian mosaics of the "holy picture" variety, are the only things in its favor. If anyone is interested enough to go into the matter thoroughly he can go down to the Customs House and read some of the lengthy decisions of various U. S. Customs Courts on the matter, and incidentally on what does or does not constitute a "work of art". They are both amusing and exasperating.

Well, to get back nearer home—on the choice of materials available we have marble, dozens of new kinds of glass, encaustic tile, terra-cotta tile, metals, colored cement and synthetic substances. And there is no doubt that we could make in this country a substitute for Venetian enamel should the need arise. In fact, they have already done some experimenting, and I believe with some success in the Federal Arts Project.

As to method, we are almost more fortunate in having to start from scratch than in having a rigid technique from which to break away. Artistically, the greatest fault of the old school (the Modern Venetian school, to be exact) is its preoccupation with the reproduction of the exact aspects of a picture, rather than in the use of the medium as a means of creating a new picture. They have developed the technique to the point where it has become completely sterile as a creative medium. This doesn't mean that we cannot learn much of a practical advantage from the old school period. I understand that there is now a school in Ravenna which teaches the established technical methods from a more modern point of view, and where some very fine modern work is being done.

Very little seems to be known of the real old methods, other than a mortar of lime, or lime and pipe clay was used, and that the materials were anything from mother-of-pearl and semi-precious stones to colored pebbles, and of course

(Concluded on page 6, col. 1)

Revival of Mosaic

(Continued from page 2)

Mr. Gaetano Ducchini, at the Sculptor's Work Shop, and in a few months' time the completed designs will be in place on the walls. With a palette of some twenty different colored marbles, the range of which can be varied by the degree of polish which the stone receives, plus a liberal use of gold and silver leaf, it is proving possible to carry out the color scheme of the original designs almost exactly, and when completed and in place they should make the Alameda County Court House lobby one of the show places of this region.

Early in the Federal Art Program the idea of doing mosaics was passed along to the Southern California project by Mr. Danysh, now Regional Advisor, and was promptly put to good use, with the result that there are already several small mosaics completed in that section and a large crew is now engaged in the assembling of a tremendous mosaic for the city of Long Beach. This work, when completed, will undoubtedly be the largest single mosaic ever created. The cost to the sponsors, for materials alone, will be over $3,000 and it will be visible, as a colorful design at least, for fifteen or twenty blocks.

The marked differences in character between the mosaic work in the northern and southern parts of the State are extremely interesting and provocative of speculation. In contrast to the comparatively subdued tones of the marble and faience tile tesserae used in the North, which are chipped, or clipped, to the required size and shape as the mosaic is assembled, and laid out, in the Italian manner, with an irregular grout line to disguise the joints between sections, the Southerners employ a commercial tile which is baked in standard, geometric shapes. It has a wide range of very strong colors and a hard, almost brilliant, glaze. In setting, the grout lines are kept either horizontal or perpendicular and, rather than being disguised, are frequently accentuated to form a part of the design.

There are several possible reasons for these differences. Probably the determining factor, however, is the profound conviction of Mr. S. Macdonald-Wright, Los Angeles Supervisor, that while the northern method is admirably suited to the "more subdued lighting and comparatively sombre background," in the South, with its brilliant light and theatrical background the competition is such that the colors *must* be brilliant "to be seen at all."

Two facts are outstanding in the program of the Federal Art Project to date. One—because of the willingness of outstanding artists to work for the modest salary which the government can afford to pay and because of the intelligent utilization of comparatively inexpensive materials, fine art is made available to all the people, for the first time in the history of the country, at a price which the people can afford to pay. Two—so many sponsors have availed themselves of this opportunity that the total contributions, for materials alone, in California for the past year is over $65,000, *undoubtedly more money than has been spent for contemporary art in the whole previous history of the State.* And there is at least twice that much available for immediate use if there were artists enough on the project to grant the requests which pour in at an ever-increasing rate.

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Directors for 1937 Elected

At the annual election of the San Francisco Art Association, held at the California School of Fine Arts, December 8th, the following were elected to the Board of Directors:

Mr. Timothy Pflueger, Mr. William W. Crocker, Mr. Edgar Walter, Mr. Templeton Crocker, Mrs. Leon Liebes, Mr. Bruce Porter, Mr. William A. Gaw.

The following were elected to the Artists' Council:

To serve for three years—Miss Esther Bruton, Mr. Frank Bergman, Mr. John Haley, Mr. Parker Hall, Mr. Sargent Johnson.

To serve for two years—Mr. Victor Arnautoff, Mr. Ray Bertrand, Mr. Ray Boynton, Mr. Nelson Poole, Mrs. Marian Simpson.

To serve for one year—Mr. Oliver Albright, Mr. George Harris, Mr. William Hesthal, Mrs. Ruth Cravath Wakefield, Mrs. Harriet Whedon.

Alternates—Mr. Ben Cunningham, Mrs. Edith Hamlin, Mr. Thomas Lehman, Mr. Julius Pommer.

Ex-Officio—Mr. Lee Randolph, Mrs. Mildred Rosenthal.

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The latest acquisition to the Bender Collection is a fine group of Oliver Albright's lithographs of the Bay Bridge.

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The San Francisco Federation of Arts has appointed Mr. Irving Morrow as chairman of a committee to trace the responsibility of the recent decorations (?) on Market Street and to study ways and means for satisfactory civic adornment in the future.

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Mosaic as a Modern Expression

(Continued from page 4)

marble and glass. In a recent number of *Cailler d'Art,* there were photographs of some very ancient samples using a flat field area of stone or baked enamel. There seem to be practically no books written on the subject of mosaic, but there is one, "The History of Mosaic," by Edgar Anthony, which has very little technical information in it, but a very complete index of where and when mosaic has been used from the earliest known examples to the modern. One of the most interesting things in it is to find that the Italians went through a very realistic stage (around the third and fourth centuries) before they developed the beautiful and architecturally right Byzantine style. There are also some reproductions of modern German mosaic. It seems that in Germany there is a more widespread Renaissance of the medium than in any other country.

And speaking of modern examples, I wish more people could see the ones on the outside of the Bowling Clubhouse in Lakeside Park, Oakland. They are by a Scotchman, Robert Howden, who most of his life has been in the tile business, but one of whose hobbies is mosaic. These are done with encaustic tile. And one should not miss the smaller ones hung on the walls inside the building. He probably doesn't know that the small pieces are called "tesserae", but he has created some works of art—I think.

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Alumni Dinner

The Alumni of the California School of Fine Arts held their annual dinner at the Art School on the evening of November 19th.

Vagabond journeyings and sketching tours, culminating with jury-free exhibitions, were the main subjects of discussion and met with enthusiastic support.

Sketching tours, patterned after those of the Sierra Club, will be held on Sundays and each excursion will be planned by a leader who will have traversed the country to be covered.

Details of these tours will be listed monthly in the Art Association Bulletin.

Fifth Annual Parilia on Feb. 5th

The Fifth Annual Parilia of the San Francisco Art Association will be held on the evening of February 5th, 1937, at the Civic Auditorium. The motif will be Barbaric Oceania.

Included in the Oceanic Group of Islands are New Caledonia, Papua, British New Guinea, Fiji Islands, Cook Group, Tonga, Headhunters of Borneo, Maori, Bismarck Group, Caroline Archipelago, Solomon Islands and New Hebrides.

The theme of the pageant follows: The people of all the Islands of Oceania gather at Rapa Nui to commemorate in feasting and dancing the recapture of fire by Maui, the demi-god, who brought back the flame from the witch who guarded it, and which for years had been extinguished in the villages.

The Art Association Group, which will represent the Solomon Islands, will be led by Zygmund Sazevich, assisted by Eugene Ivanoff and Merlin Hardy. Research regarding costumes and pageantry is now under way and Art Association members will be advised of the first meeting of their group, to be held soon.

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List of prize winners in the Students' Exhibition, now hanging at the California School of Fine Arts, is as follows:

Advanced Oil Painting—Nell Sinton.

Elementary Oil Painting—Doris Padilla.

Sculpture—Ruth Wik.

Ceramics—Esther Rosen.

Graphic Art—Stanley Galli.

Textiles—Kathleen Woodward.